The Road to Emmaus
Luke 24:13-32
April 21, 1974

I have always felt that this Sunday is the most interesting, and perhaps the most important in the church year. Ministers love Easter. We even delude ourselves into thinking that all those people came to hear us, while the truth of the matter is that churches would be full on Easter Sunday even if no one was preaching. And so, I've always had a soft spot in my heart for this day: for those who have a natural propensity for the underdog, there's nothing like the Sunday after Easter.

It's not that I have anything against Easter. Quite to the contrary, I love it for the same reasons as everyone else. I love the full sanctuary, the great music, the resurrection hymns. I even indulge myself with the yearly fantasy that all those people are going to come back the next Sunday.

The trouble with Easter is that it isolates an event that happened in the distant past, celebrates that event in grand style, explains it, discusseses it. But that is only half of what ~~Easter~~ the Resurrection means. For Christian Faith ~~the resurrection of Jesus Chris~~ EASTER says something about a reality that has to do with the present. It is a past event, to be sure: ~~the tomb was empty.~~ But the significance of the event is that it speaks about a Christ who is wondrously present in our world - our lives.

I was intrigued last summer to learn about the ancient clans of Scotland. For all practical purposes the clans ceased to exist as a functional unit of c society in 1745. In order to get at the heart of the Scot's stubborn resistance to the crown, the English simply outlawed the clans. They are a thing of the past and have absolutely nothing to do with the mainstream of contemporary Scottish life. But there are occasions when the old Tartans are brought out and worn. A past reality is celebrated with great enthusiasm and traditional ritual, even though that reality has nothing to do with the present.

Easter is a little like that, I fear. We celebrate something that happened 2,000 years ago. We have a whole set of rituals with which to do our celebrating. But the significance of Easter is not just the empty tomb, that is - the past ~~reality~~ reality, but rather the present reality to which that empty tomb points; namely, Jesus Christ

who is alive and involved in our world and in touch with your life and mine.

That's the thrust of the New Testament on the subject. There are several appearances of the Risen Lord to his disciples included in the Gospel accounts. All of them are strange, precisely because they happen in such normal, common-place circumstances. To read them carefullly is to sense that the emphasis is not so much on the awesome and mysterious fact that Christ rose from that dead, as it is on the fact that the disciples perceived that he was present with them. Those appearences did not continue indefintely: they ceased: a phenomenon the church has tried to describe in the doctrine of the ascension. What didn't cease was the experience of the early church that Jesus Christ was somehow just as present to them as he had beeen during his life. They knew he was with them: they knew that the power and healing of his love were still dynamically present witnin their fellowship. They knew it particularly when they broke bread together. For them, ("Jesus Christ is Risen") did not so much indicate something that had happened in the middle of the night on the second day after his crucifixion, as it pointed to the experience they continued to have - the experience of Christ's presence.

Think, for instance, about the New Testamt lesson this morning. It is very helpful I beleive, in demonstrating something of what the early church experienced after Easter, and something of what the Risen Christ continues to do in the life of men.

Let's look again at the story.

when it happens it is a surprise - an intrusion - that cannot be nailed down: and that when it happens it may be ambiguous and not altogether clear. We may not recognize it at first.

#1

With this in mind, let us look again at Luke's story. Jesus was dead, and now it was Sunday, the first day of a new week. On Saturday I can imagine the disciples together in their locked room, trying to come to grips with the unspeakable tragedy that had happened the afternoon before. I see them pacing back and forth, trying to make conversation, being a more solicitous than usual. But now Sunday, Jerusalem was returning to normal Life was going on, and two of them decided to do a very logical thing: to get away for a while: to escape from the grief - the guilt because they had abandoned him - the unanswered questions - the deep doubts - the beautiful dream that had died with him. A few hysterical women had come to their hiding place clammoring about an empty tomb, and all that did was make the tension greater and the gloom thicker.

So they decided to walk to Emmaus: two of them, ~~in order to escape~~ We are not told why they went: we know that Emmaus is just a few miles outside Jerusalem, that it was a very small settlement: and I am suggesting that for them the only thing Emmaus had going for it was that it wasn't Jerusalem and thus an escape.

You know the rest. As they walked they were joined by a third man with whom they talked about the events of the past several days. They persuaded the stranger to eat the evening meal with them in Emmaus. And when, at table, the stranger broke the bread, blessed it and gave it to them, they suddenly, remarkably recognized him. It was Jesus - alive and sitting right there with them. And then he left. In the process of escaping he came to them: in the most unlikely circumstances the divine broke in on their lives: and before they could nail it down, before they could draw a picture or write a poem, the experience was over. One fleeting moment of revealation: one moment of certainty: and then they were alone again.

I conclude from that something that I regard as very important: namely that Jesus Christ comes to us in the common experiences of our lives: that he comes to us specifically as we engage in our gentle escapism. I am infering - and I mean to infer -

* to sermon

The disciples, after all, were engaging in a very routine activity. They were trying to get away from it all, taking a walk to relieve the tension and mounting pressure of that locked room in Jerusalem. They were not sitting in the Temple, they weren't reading the Bible, they weren't praying: they ~~were~~ were on the road to Emmaus.

All of us have our Roads to Emmaus, our method of getting away from it all; reading, watching television, going to a movie, some activity that will pull us back from the pressures and tensions of our lives. It is not uncommon for a ~~Doc~~tor or Psychiatrist to prescribe a little play, a little diversion, a little activity that demands our physical and emotional attention as an antidote to worry and depression.

Of corse, there are methods of escapism that are unhealthy and destructive. Alcoholism is an extemely complex disease, but part of the problem for many alcoholics is the deep need to escape from life in general, or from a particularly threatening situaTION, or from ~~himself~~ themselves. The appeal of drugs for many people is the same. And in a curious twist, particular to our ~~c~~ulture at this time, work - instead of being the source of tension, becomes the escape. The compulsive worker who says he's just trying to get ahead may, in fact, be using work as a way of escaping tension and frustration in other areas of his life - his family, for instance.

On a broader level, we need and engage in mass, cultural escapism. The Roman Emperors knew that a good circus~~/ ////////~~ distract people's attention from the Barbarian invasions in the North. Streaking did that for us this spring. After a grim winter punctuated by Watergate and all its accompanying humiliation; inflation, rising prices, and on top of it all a fuel shortage, someone somewhere decided that it was a good idea to take off his clothes and run through a theatre. The rest is history. Psychologically we had reached the ~~pint~~ point where some manner of escapism needed to come into play. We needed a circus,. And I canthink of a long list of activities more destructive and unhealthy that waht, in fact, transpired this spring.

In any case, the gentle art of escapism is one of the most common kinds of human behavior. All of us have our Road to Emmaus. And one of the continuing themes of the Bible is that even here - Jesus Christ comes to us.

Centuries before Christ a Psalmist wrote it down in what has become for me one of the most suggestive and meaningful portions of scripture: #3 P4 Sermon

for me has become one of the most suggestive and personally meaningful portions of scripture.

#3

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to Heaven, thou art there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." (Psalm 139:
7:10)

The poet, Francis Thompson, called it "The Hound of Heaven" and wrote movingly about how, over the labyrinth of time, he sensed himself pursued, chased and found by God himself.

That's the first thing that I conclude: that whatever the Road to Emmaus is for us, Jesus Christ will keep breaking in to walk with us: ~~that there is no escape: that no matter how we try to elude him, we will be found.~~

The second conclusion is that when it happens: when the certainty of God occurs in our lives, we will try but fail to nail it down permanently. At Emmaus Jesus Christ revealed himself to the two disciples and then left. But you and I want very badly to preserve those moments. We want to make normative the one experience of certainty

and grace. Some people come to worship every week expecting to be hit between the eyes with a sense of their own salvation. Some people want to "get high" on Jesus: to live constantly with the euphoric sense of God's presence. Some churches seem to know how to do it weekly and have made the moment of truth into an emotional upheaval that must be played and replayed again and again, as if its meaning would disappear if the experience is not repeated. And I want to say that, that too can be a form of escapism: that to demand regular authenticating of one's faith is, essentially, to escape from the reality of life: that the divine may break in as we walk to Emmaus, but that it is not honest to demand a whole life lived on this level.

The second conclusion is

I conclude, In the third place, that when the divine breaks in, when Jesus Christ comes to us, we may not immediately recognize him. That was the disciples' experience. They walked and talked with him for some time: they sat down at a table with him: presumably they looked right at him. And they didn't know who he was. What else could that mean but that Jesus Christ comes in ways that are not always obvious, and that do not necessarily correspond with our own expectation regarding our encounter with him? We have been taught, even though we may not subscribe to it intellectually that Christian conversion happens in a certain way, that a religious experience will be manifested in certain feelings; that when God choses to confront us we will be as sure of it as anything that has ever happened to us. We associate it with the dramatic, unnatural occurence: the bolt of lightning, the mysterious vision. Biblically, we recall the burning bush for Moses, and the Damascus road for Paul: precise, crystal clear experiences of God's reality and God's will.

Most of us are not that fortunate. Nor were the two disciples at Emmaus. - let us recall - They recognized him in the breaking of bread: and so, I would suggest, God moves among us. Jesus Christ comes, I believe, mostly in the quiet, honest encounters between people: Jesus Christ appears as a stranger when something kind and surprising and beautiful happens: when someone says "I care about you" and means it: when someone says "I'm praying for you" and does it; when through the grace of God we are enabled to minister to and heal and help each other. He comes, I believe, when we break bread together and enjoy each other: he comes, I believe, in a child baptized, affirming the mysterious

beauty of human birth and the compelling need for human love.

He comes, I believe, as we perceive the suffering of other people: he reveals himself in the broken bodies of ~~the war~~ refugee dead, in the drawn face of a starving child, in the angry face of an oppressed black brother. ~~There is no escape from that.~~

In the final analysis, the presence of Jesus Christ, is what we have to offer the world and each other. ~~Our~~ commitment compells us to live for others, to heal the sick and feed the hungry. But when all is said and done, all we really have is the presence of Jesus Christ and the certainty of his presence in the world. → to it 4 ser.

A group of clergymen met last week and as we broke bread together we were lamenting the lack of impact the church has on society, and the relative impotence of the combined churches in our own community. And the conversation turned to an experience we all shared - serving communion to the patients of St. Elizabeth Hospital on Maunday Thursday. To a man we were deeply effected by this strange role of offering the presence of Jesus Christ to people we didn't know. Many of us have received thank you notes from those people. And we concluded that in the final analysis this is what we are about as ministers, and this is what the Church is about - the sharing and celebrating of the presence of Jesus Christ.

Albert Schweitzer, among his many gifts, was a great scholar. He wrote a very sophisticated ~~work~~ book which became one of the most influential ~~books~~ works in the field of New Testament Scholarship - "The Quest for the Historical Jesus". But he ended his book on a deeply devotional note. I would like to read to you from the last paragraph of "The Quest for the Historical Jesus"

"He comes to us as One Unknown, without a name, as of old....he came to those who know him not. He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow me', and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in their fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is".

So he comes to us here - in our fellowship: and in our toils, our work, our relationships - and on our Road to Emmaus.

Amen

Again this year I participated in an experienc e on Maundy Thursday that has become very important to me. I was part of a group of ministers who served the Sacrament of Communion to Protestant Patients at St. Elizabeth hospital. It's a different and strange role for us as Prtestants. For us, the power of communion is generated out of the fellowship of the congregation - people we know well. Unlike our Roman Catholic brethren we do not feel that there is any inherent significance or power in the elements themselves. And so it was different - to take a wafer and cup of wine to poeple I didn't know, and to serve them with the words, ("This is my body .. this is my blood . ." And even though I am not given to mystical experiences, I gladly testify that he was present for those patients. That exercise conforms for me, annually what my ministry - but more importantly, the church and the Gospel - are all about. - The sharing and celebrating of the presence of Jesus Chrst in the world.

I cannot prove that presence. If somehow the resurrectioln - and the presence of Christ in the world - could be proved, we would have no choice but to believe. And my deepest conviction is that the moment we lose our freedom not to believe, not to love God, not to follow Jesus Christ, we lose whatever it is that makes us human beings It cannot be proved: it can only beexperienced and pointed to when it happens.

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That is the meaning of the resurrection. That is the word that needs to be shared on the Sunday after Easter.

He comes to us - here - in our fellowship: and in our ~~trials~~ toils, our conflicts, our loves, our joys, our griefs, our work, our families - and on our Road s to Emmaus.

Amen

Father, you have come to each of us in the past as a stranger,. Help us to recognize you. Open our ears to your voice as it comes through the voices of others. And enable us to share and celebrate your presence in the common experiences of our life together. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.